

Producing an Ecology-Based Textbook

By Amalia E. Avila Lopez, Concepcion Morales Santamaria and Rosa Maria Velasco Aponte

In August 1992, after almost 20 years of teaching according to a structural approach, teachers of English in secondary schools in Mexico found themselves with a new communicative syllabus. What a change! Unable to get the training needed in such a short time and having to begin immediately, the teachers' only help to cope with this innovation was an appropriate textbook. Convinced as we are that teaching materials are the best means for showing teachers how to make this change, we decided to participate in this adventure. The materials described in this article are part of IMAGINE I: In Search of Nature (McGraw Hill/Interamericana de México, 1992), a textbook for secondary-school students.¹

Students in government secondary schools in Mexico are adolescents (13-15 years old), affective beings with specific problems, interests, and needs. They are true beginners in EFL. With long experience in teaching English at this level and in training teachers, we were aware of some of the problems a teacher at this level faces:

- very little knowledge, if any, of the proposed communicative approach
- overcrowded classrooms (40 or more students)
- many class sessions with little time to prepare for them
- little opportunity for teachers to practice the language
- almost no access to specialized bibliographies
- in many cases, almost no access to authentic materials

Some of the questions we had to answer in designing our materials were:

1. How can we motivate and involve teenagers in learning English?
2. Should these materials have a main theme to be developed from beginning to end?
3. How can we include cultural information about other countries, so students can learn something about how people in other places live?
4. What will students learn through English?

For a student-centered approach, we should include topics that appeal to the students' interests, such as sports, animals, friendship, games, songs, and, of course, love. We thought the characters should be mainly teenagers, so the students can identify with them. Since these materials were meant to be used throughout the entire country, we decided that the goal of the exercises should be to enable students to speak or write about their own situation. The materials should include a wide variety of challenging activities that draw on the students' knowledge of the world. The activities should also promote good relations among students and develop their creativity by leading them to imagine ideal situations where they would have the power to modify the environment and make it the way they would like it to be.

Choosing Characters and Topic

In developing these materials we began with two major decisions:

1. It would be a story containing 15 characters-teenagers from all over the world- which provides a good opportunity to introduce characteristics of people from different cultures. All of these, students from both English- and non-English-speaking countries, were given a rather complete background (a place and date of birth, parents, a zodiac sign, likes, dislikes, eating habits, religion, etc.) to make them as real as possible.

Moreover, experience has taught us that however rich a theme might be, the same characters appearing over and over again throughout the school year can make any material dull and boring. So we introduced additional people and situations.

2. We agreed with the premise that learning a language requires much more than the simple repetition of structures to talk about irrelevant matters. Therefore, the topic should be one that could provide students not only with a wider view of the world they live in but with the opportunity to learn something relevant and useful. Besides, we were very concerned about the ecological disaster the world is facing, and certain that every one of us can and must do something to stop it. So we decided to adopt an ecological approach. After consulting a great number of materials on ecology in order to design the activities in our book, we realized that the ecological problems are worse than we had thought. Now we are certain that both teachers and students must be made aware of these problems and must participate in protecting the environment.

The inclusion of ecological subject matter in our teaching materials offered a variety of possibilities for practicing language as a real means of communication and gave students a chance to do research in an interesting and rather new field.

Integrating the Story and Language Skills

Having made these two major decisions about our materials, we had to determine how they could be integrated in a realistic way to introduce the linguistic contents the syllabus proposes. The resulting situation was a trip where 15 teenagers interested in ecology and taking part in an ecological crusade interact during their visit to various parts of the world on a sailing ship called "Save the Earth."

The first page of the book introduces teacher and students to the book's main topic. The elements they find there explain the beginning of the trip. A fragment of an imaginary Mexican newspaper article written in Spanish, the students' native language, gives coherence to the book by explaining that a group of teenagers, coming from different countries and bringing with them an ecological message, is ready to sail from Acapulco, a Mexican port on the Pacific Ocean.

The following are examples of exercises where different skills are practiced, with ecology as the main topic.

BEGINNING TO INVOLVE STUDENTS IN ECOLOGY

Situation: Passengers on the ship are given their name tags at the registration desk. One piece of information on the tag is the ecological workshop these youngsters are participating in.

Exercise: Students must imagine they are taking part in this trip. They must make their own tag and fill in the registration form, including the ecological workshop they would like to be in, chosen from the list behind the desk. As this is the first time these environmental problems have been mentioned, the teacher must introduce students to the specific vocabulary and ask them to explain briefly, in their native language, what they know about these problems.

LISTENING

Situation: The sailing ship has landed in San Francisco, and the passengers are going ashore. A journalist is interviewing some of them.

Exercise: The students listen to these interviews and answer questions about them as true or false. They listen again while reading the script and check their answers. Then they imagine they are journalists and prepare an interview for a different passenger.

Roleplay: The journalist interviews a classmate, who adopts the personality of one of the teenagers on the ship and answers the questions according to the chosen role.

FIXING STRUCTURES

Situation: The teenagers say what they do or don't do to protect our planet.

Exercise: This provides the students with an opportunity to practice affirmative and negative sentences in a rather communicative way. To conclude this exercise students can briefly explain in their native language their reasons for their answer.

A Micro-course on Reading

In addition to the development of the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), our new syllabus proposes the inclusion of reading material in which Spanish is used to give instructions and the answers to exercises, and to express the students' reactions to the text. With this in mind, and because we found that reading was the ability that best lent itself to integrating the ecological content to this beginners' level of English, we decided to design a micro-course on techniques and strategies for reading, based mainly on the topic of ecology. This micro-course would run parallel to the development of the four skills. It would gradually introduce basic reading techniques and strategies, and, where possible, we would exploit the texts to practice the functions and structures being taught at that stage of the syllabus.

The idea of designing such a micro-course arose from the following considerations:

1. Language should not be an end in itself, but a means of conveying information and feelings about something. We thought that ecology, being a topic of general interest, would provide us with the perfect means to convey relevant and useful information to our students, since environmental problems are worldwide problems. Texts with environmental content would also provide the student with the opportunity both to see how they can identify themselves with the characters and situations described and to express their reactions to these texts. We set as our ultimate goal that at the end of our three-book series, after reading a text, a student could, for example, say: “Well, in such and such part of the world people are facing these kinds of environmental problems. And here in Mexico, what are the problems we are facing? What can I do to solve them?”

For this part of the syllabus students would not use English to communicate orally, but as a means to gain information that would enable them to discuss, argue, express their emotions, etc., in their native language. Contrary to what some might think, using the students’ native language in this way not only does not hinder their learning of English, but tends to support their practice of what they have already learned, and to enlarge their vocabulary and their ability to freely express their answers, feelings, opinions, etc.

2. Secondary-school students need creative materials that engage their interest and challenge their abilities. In choosing ecology, for which there are abundant materials written in English, we knew we could always find useful and relevant authentic materials that would enable us to design exercises that challenge not only the students’ understanding, but also their ability to reason, make associations, etc. In addition, through the use of authentic ecological texts we designed exercises where students are asked to draw, color, cut, do some research, etc.

3. Students need as many opportunities as possible to put into use their language abilities and the knowledge they have (both academic knowledge and knowledge of the world). We do not mean that they must decode or understand every word in a text, but through using the appropriate strategies and with the language they are gaining in their English course, together with their knowledge about the world, they should be able to get the gist of the text. We were mindful of the fact that the difficulty in exploiting authentic texts does not lie in the text itself, but in the types of tasks we ask the students to do with the information they obtain from the text. The diversity of the ecological texts we chose helped us to create a variety of exercises requiring students to put to use their English and their knowledge of the world.

4. We learn more when we are interested in what we are studying. Having discovered that many of the ecological texts are written very attractively, our hope is that eventually we will be able to sensitize both teachers and students to the fact that something must be done to help our planet. With this involvement we expect the students’ interest to grow so that they want to “read” every text that comes into their hands.

According to the new syllabus, all the things mentioned above should be done within the communicative approach. This brought us to a second line of thought, where we considered some other facts:

1. We had to always keep in mind that we were dealing with real beginners in both the English language and in ecological education. Therefore we should choose materials that arouse the students' interest because of content and not because of the language.

2. Most secondary-school students in Mexico haven't had enough preparation in study techniques. By teaching reading techniques and strategies, we would be helping them to master this useful skill.

3. After concluding their secondary-school studies, not all students have access to higher education. Those students who can further their studies will find that schools at university and pre-university level devote their English courses to the teaching of techniques and strategies for reading. Our intention would be to provide these students with an elementary basis to help them cope with these future formal reading courses. For those students who will not be able to go on with formal education, we intend, through this micro-course, to provide them with an elementary tool to face texts written in English that they so frequently come across in their everyday life or in their future work. The fact is that all our students need and use the ability to read above speaking, listening, or writing.